

Materials, Methods, and Methodologies

Asma and Taylor

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In addition to Asma's story and my "Field Notes," the following recordings will work as an analytical exploration of particular themes about culture, narrative, and what Asma's story says about these ideas. In lieu of an introductory chapter, this first recording will work as a kind of overview of the project: what I found inspiration in, what I sought to do, and what Asma and I eventually created. This "season" will end with a recording from Asma herself, in which she has a chance to respond to my analysis and reflect on this process as a whole.

But I'm getting a bit ahead of myself here. Let's start with the introduction and move from there.

This ethnographic project does not follow any particular sort of precedent. Its form, organization, arrangement, and tone are utterly different from any of the work that I have encountered in my undergraduate education at Kenyon.

However, it does take inspiration from a few sources and resources. Marjorie Shostak's *Nisa* comes to mind, as it is an in-depth, incredibly personal ethnographic work that focuses on a single woman's story. My feminist lens and approach to this process thus took inspiration from Shostak's process, and I innovated from there. As opposed to a typical life history, Asma's and my interviews felt more like conversations. I did not actively try to remain objective or silent throughout this process. Asma and I were in dialogue constantly, and the conversation shifted organically between her own story, our current lives, and discussion of the project itself. I was a sympathetic, empathetic listener, and Asma and I developed a friendship over the course of this work.

The collaborative aspect of this ethnography was also integral to my inspiration and methodology. In an article on collaborative ethnography, Lassiter asks, "what happens when we collaboratively read and interpret the ethnographic text *alongside* our consultants *as it develops*—not just sitting down to verify quotes, for example (which is merely bureaucratic), but using the developing text as the centerpiece of evolving ongoing conversation?" (2001: 139).

This quote perfectly encapsulates what I wanted to do with Asma when we first sat down and started talking, and it really has come to fruition. Together, we decided what this story meant, what it could mean, and how we would share it. It has been a continual conversation—one which persists even now—about what would be the *best* way for Asma to tell and share her story.

As such, it is clear that the *story* is center to this project. Rios and Sands' *Telling a Good One: The Process of a Native American Collaborative Ethnography* was a key inspiration for that focus, as Sands uses her work to explain how the story can be lost in the analysis and manipulation of ethnographic creation. My analysis, then, culminates in a series of "Field Notes" that I recorded, completely improvised, throughout this process, as well as some more detailed thoughts in this collection of recordings you are currently listening to. I am also including a kind of annotated bibliography with resources and research that I found useful as Asma and I worked to create this project.

Consequently, you will not find any generalizing conclusions about "the refugee's experience," "the Muslim woman's experience," "the immigrant mother's experience"... Asma's story may

Speak to these identities, but she is not a representative of them. None of these is wholly her, either. She is a culmination of contexts, relationships, experiences, and emotions. And I do not want to try to fit her story and experiences into more analytical boxes and structures. I do not feel that I have the adequate training, research, or authority to do so.

This project is therefore an exercise in storytelling that is multimedia, collaborative, and reflexive in nature. But, first and foremost, it is an exercise in storytelling. Asma and I want to share her story with the world, not because it represents a culture, but because it dismantles misrepresentations of cultures and the people who live them. The typical individual—myself included—has a set of preconceived notions about what it means to be Somalian, Muslim, a refugee, a woman, a daughter, and a mother, as well as what it means to associate with any combination of these descriptors. By sharing her story, Asma and I hope that this will give others a human voice that can break through the dialogue *about* such individuals.

A final inspiration: Gayatri Spivak's "Can the Subaltern Speak?" was seminal to the backbone of this project. A subaltern is, in short, a person who has been so oppressed and excluded by people and groups in power that they are voiceless, unheard, and unrepresented in wider discourse. Spivak argues that the subaltern *cannot* speak, and I think I agree with her. Asma is *not* a subaltern. In fact, she is not even a refugee: she is a citizen of the United States of America. She *has* a voice. And this is what we want to share. This is what I want ethnography to do here: to *amplify* a voice, instead of taking one away by mimicking it or dissolving it into theoretical discussion.

Now that you have a sense of what Asma and I are seeking to do with this project, you will know that transparency and reflexivity are key elements in the final product. Consequently, the following recording will describe the circumstances and methods through which we created this project.

Asma and I met through a refugee organization my advisor knew about. I reached out to them in September 2018, explaining my interest in working with one of their clients by letting them share their story. By mid-October, they had found Asma and asked her if she would be willing to share her story. When she said she was, I joined the ranks of "Family Support Volunteer," which basically meant that I would act as a source of support as Asma advocates for her mother's application for asylum in the United States.

We first met in her house, and we had an unrecorded conversation in which we shared a bit about ourselves and began discussing this project. After that, I recorded the vast majority of our ensuing ten conversations on a Sony digital audio recorder, totaling 17 hours, 51 minutes, and 30 seconds. In addition to Asma's home, other conversations took place at a Tim Horton's, local public library, and a favorite Somalian restaurant of Asma's. The meetings lasted between one and four hours, and they were loosely guided by an outline that Asma and I developed on how she might tell her story. It was relatively chronological in scope, but conversation shifted seamlessly between the past, present, and future, as well as across countries and continents.

I then listened to the recordings, selectively transcribing a large portion and taking detailed notes on the rest. I shared both the documents and recordings with Asma, and we referenced these

throughout our conversations. After reading and listening to everything, Asma decided how she wanted to organize her story in its edited form, and she and I agreed that I would do the arranging and sound editing necessary to reduce nearly eighteen hours into something that a listener would be able to understand and enjoy. The final product is about three hours long, edited through Audacity, and uploaded through Archive.org. I also transcribed all of these collections, and Asma annotated them with her own thoughts and reactions to the “episodes” we created.

The episodes are then uploaded to a Wix website that I created. The platform also contains transcripts of each episode, as well as my “Field Notes,” analysis, the annotated bibliography, and some other creative elements.

Finally, I would like to take a moment to share a bit about mine and Asma’s relationship with one another. Since this project is actively reflexive and collaborative, the power dynamics between the ethnographer and her collaborator are key here.

As a young, unmarried, non-Muslim, white, upper-middle-class, female student at a liberal arts college, I definitely held a certain level of simultaneous privilege and ignorance. Throughout our conversations, my authority most prominently lay in my apparent educational expertise. She started her college journey during this project’s creation, so she tended to admit her inexperience with speaking and writing in English.

Alternately, Asma, as a married mother of three who is a former refugee from a predominantly Muslim African nation, holds a different set of experiences and statuses in United States culture and society. However, she also had a great deal of authority that came with her age, experiences as a wife and mother, and a Muslim woman, as well as the wisdom and worldliness (and trauma) that came from being alone and stateless at a remarkably young age, as well as starting entirely over in a new country on the other side of the world.

The risks and benefits presented by this project are the clearest evidence of the power dynamic. This is an honors project for me, one which I have chosen to complete on my own time, outside my typical studies. While I have the potential to receive academic honors for this work—if a committee deems it worthy—Asma does not receive any sort of monetary or academic gain from this. If anything, taking the time out of her busy schedule and sharing deeply personal, and sometimes painful, memories in order to share her story with a wider audience presents more risks than benefits.

However, Asma is not “my subject,” “my interviewee,” or even “my consultant.” She is “my collaborator,” one who has an equal, if not dominant, say in her narrative and how it is portrayed. Moreover, Asma herself has expressed a feeling of confidence as she tells her story. Our conversations are a “break” from her daily life, and she repeatedly says how much she has enjoyed this process. Asma *wants* to share her story, and we both hope that this first project will provide a foundation for a book she hopes to write in the future. We also both hope that sharing this story will open peoples’ hearts and minds to the breadth and depth of a person’s experience, and that labels like “Muslim” or “refugee” cannot come close to capturing such a life.